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NUMBER 1

# ETHICS AND PHILOSOPHY

BY WILLIAM M. *Hackintere* SALTER

C.  
CONSERVATOR  
PHILADELPHIA  
1891



1878-1880

Gift of the Author.

## Ethics and Philosophy.\*

The human mind is not easily daunted. It is its noble ambition to understand the laws and causes of things, to know the whence, the wherefore and the issue of human life, to form a clear and intelligible picture of the universe as a whole. It learns one set of views and gets accustomed to them so that they seem a sort of spiritual house in which it dwells with ease and comfort; and yet if it is obliged to anyhow unlearn them, to quit this and that room or even to abandon the house itself as unsafe and outworn, it does not become faint or weary, but straightway proceeds to build a house anew.

"When the old world is sterile,  
And the ages are effete,  
[It] will from wrecks and sediment  
The fairer world complete."

The philosophic instinct seems to be inborn in man; it belongs to his higher life; in proportion as he loses it his life becomes sensual, brutish. Nothing is more encouraging than the varied philosophical activities of the present day; they give one a sense that man is still young on this old planet; the very diversity of them and the birth of new systems show the vigor and rich capacities of the soil. Particularly encouraging may be said to be the recent reaction against what is called "agnosticism." That word as originally used signified something very definite—it meant, indeed, a set of philosophical opinions; but it has come to mean popularly a distrust of and aversion to philosophy, a state of mental indifference to all serious problems, a saying "We do not know or care." This fashionable agnosticism, this easy ignorance, this comfortable renunciation of profound thinking, merits the rebuke which it is receiving from vigorous hands; their ignoring the stricter meaning of philosophical agnosticism nowise takes away from the popular value of their polemic. Surely, if the old theological systems are to be given up—the systems of an Augustine, an Aquinas, a Calvin—they can only be replaced by those who will think with equal earnestness, with equal patience and care. In the intellectual world as in the physical world the victory is to the eager, the bold, to those who will never give up the search for what they want.

The question arises, What is the true attitude of an ethical society to philosophical systems? I believe that it should be, in the first place, one of hospitality. It should not make itself an obstacle to progress and the free development of the mind. It should not bar any one from its membership because he holds to philosophical views different from those that ordinarily prevail. It should recognize that this is an age of change, of the breaking up of old beliefs, and that conscientious and diligent seekers after truth must be expected to more or less differ from one another in their conclusions for some time to come.

\* Delivered at Chicago, October 12, 1890; Philadelphia, March 15, 1891.



It should welcome efforts to establish philosophical clubs among its members—either to discuss philosophical problems in general or to advocate and propagate particular philosophical views. It should encourage in every way the independent intellectual life of its members. It should suggest it as a part of the moral ideal for every one to have some reasoned conclusions as to those fundamental questions on which all philosophy turns—such questions as, What is the nature of the material world about us? What is man's nature and destiny? What is the ultimate reality in the universe? It should—if I may say so without offence—dignify philosophy and make it to be recognized as every man's business, and not a luxury and refinement for a few who are closeted and cut off from our common human life. As truly as it is man's distinctive nature to think, so it is his calling to think well—accurately, carefully, thoroughly; and the result of such thinking as to man and nature and the first principles of things is philosophy. The so-called "leaders" or lecturers of ethical societies should have the same intellectual freedom; because one holds or later embraces a novel set of philosophical views, his standing in the fraternity of lecturers should not be in the slightest affected; incumbent on them, too, as on all, is the duty of clearing up their minds on fundamental questions—*i. e.*, of having a philosophy which they can state and defend.

But should not an ethical society take a step further and adopt some philosophical system as its own? At first sight this would seem a tempting proposal. It certainly would not be a good rule for an individual to hear and be tolerant to all views, but to have none of his own; why should it be for a society? It would look like a lack of courage if an individual hesitated to commit himself to a definite opinion; why should not the hesitation of a society imply the same thing? Why should not a society find out the true system and then stand for it, regardless of consequences? Suppose for a moment that we feel the force of such appeals as these,—let us see how we should proceed. How should we judge as to what is the true system? What would be the standard? Perhaps some would say that we should take the newest and most advanced. But why, abstractly speaking, should the new be necessarily the true? For myself, I should have great difficulty in allowing such a standard. I hope I should not be prejudiced against a view because it was new—and in common with most persons I should, perhaps, find it the more interesting on that account; but, strictly speaking, the truth of a doctrine I should have to separate entirely from the question of its newness or oldness. But even if the standard were accepted, might we not soon be in the embarrassing situation of having to adopt a newer view still? The intellectual world is fertile in these days and it is hard to tell what another ten or twenty years may bring forth. Of course, we ought to be glad to change if the newer system is the truer; but as matter of fact the new has often in the past been inconsistent with the old and contradictory to it, so that both could hardly have been true, unless we adopt the skeptical position that truth is simply what any one thinks. Yet if we hold now one view to be true and now

a diametrically opposed one, shall we not be in danger of losing our confidence that we are really able to get hold of the truth at all? There is another difficulty: what really are the newest views? Is it not the fact that several sets of views, different from what have been current in the past, are now before the public, each with its literature and claiming earnestly to be the truth? I confess for myself that there are more new views than I can keep track of. Hegelianism (which is comparatively new in our country), Neo-Kantianism, Spencerianism, Scientific Theism, Monism, and (shall I add?) Theosophy and Christian Science—all are or aspire to be philosophies; yet it would be difficult to decide which is the latest development, and it would certainly be invidious to make so important a choice hang on a difference of two or three years. Soberly speaking, is it not absurd in the case of such widely-contrasted views as, for example, Scientific Theism and Monism, to determine which we shall accept by the mere accident of which is the freshest contribution to the philosophy of the period?

Suppose, then, this course seeming impracticable, we take another criterion of truth. Suppose we agree that, of all the philosophies, we shall adopt the scientific philosophy. What does scientific mean? In the strict sense of the word, a view is scientific that can be successfully tested by the facts we observe or experience. Experimental verification—this is what distinguishes science, strictly speaking, from all mere theories, hypotheses and speculations. And the possibilities of such verification are much larger than we might at first suppose; far away as the sun is from us in space, hypotheses as to the chemical constitution of its rays can be tested and with surprising accuracy. There is, however, one limit that can hardly be transcended; we ourselves can only verify in the present time; others may have verified their speculations in past time and so their science may have been transmitted to us; but speculations as to what happened on the earth before there were any human beings on it at all, speculations as to the origin of the earth, and indeed of the solar system—such speculations are evidently beyond the reach of verification; we can only judge, infer, conjecture, what is likely to have been the case. The same is true of the distant future—as to what will happen, for example, after the earth becomes uninhabitable; plainly, it is impossible to experience what will happen or test our theories of what is likely to happen, *till* it happens. Indeed, our conjectures of what will happen in the next century are not science to us now—though they may become science to those who come after us. And yet it is almost inevitable that we think about matters beyond our experience; we speculate as to the origin of the earth, of life upon it, and as to the ultimate fate of the earth; we speculate as to the atoms and molecules out of which we imagine the material world is composed, though we can never see, observe or handle them; we speculate as to what is the ultimate reality in the universe, though we may not be able to actually get hold of it or more than make a picture of it in our minds. Indeed, these speculations as to the beginnings and

end of things, as to the ultimate nature of things, are what we distinctively mean by philosophy; so that to propose that an ethical society adopt a purely scientific philosophy is virtually to say (*i. e.*, to logically imply) that we shall have a philosophy which excludes these speculations. Yet to say that men shall not think on these ultimate questions, that they shall commit themselves to a philosophy which outlaws the consideration of them, is arbitrary in the extreme; it is against human nature—yes, against the curiosity which is at the bottom of science itself. By scientific, however, something broader is sometimes meant. An idea may be called scientific simply because it is in accordance with facts. A scientific philosophy (in this sense) would be one which is in accordance with the facts of the universe. But was there ever a philosophy which did not aspire to be just this? Is it not the same as saying that every philosophy aspires to be a true philosophy? Truth, too, means the correspondence of our ideas with facts. Hence, if “scientific” be taken in the broader sense, the question still confronts us, Which is the scientific or true philosophy? In other words, the standard becomes so indefinite that it ceases to have any value.

The fact is that if we are ready to espouse a true philosophical system, it is not so easy as it might at first sight appear to decide which we shall adopt. The criteria that are ready at hand are either defective or useless. In truth, there is no other way than for each one to attack the fundamental problems of philosophy for himself, applying to the task his best powers, making the widest observations, the most careful experiments, and thinking in the closest and most scrupulous manner possible. I do not doubt that, as truth is one, so true philosophy is one; I do not question man's ability to ultimately find the true philosophy—I even dare to hope that, as once civilized Europe is said to have been substantially one in holding to the Catholic faith, so at some future time another great consensus may be developed; but I think one may very legitimately doubt whether any one of the existing rival systems is the final and complete truth, whether most of them are not partial and as such destined to pass away—and sometimes I am in the mood to use the language of the poet (with slight modification):

“ Our little systems have their day,  
They have their day and cease to be;  
They are but broken lights of thee,  
And thou, O *Truth*, art more than they.”

The way, then, would seem to be for individuals and combinations of individuals to get the best and clearest conclusions they can reach, but not to lay them down as the law for an ethical society or church.

One other consideration. I have said, recognizing that the present was a time of intellectual change, that an ethical society should be hospitable to all new philosophical developments. But if it should commit itself to any of these, if it should adopt any one and set it forth as *its* system, would it not preclude from itself the possibility of extending still further hospitality as time went on? In principle, how does adopting

a new one differ from adopting an old one, which yet would have prevented the possibility of hospitality to the new? In other words, if it is our duty to put no ban on new opinions, is it not our duty to avoid standing as a society for any philosophical system at all? Moreover, any philosophical system that might be adopted, unless it were adopted unanimously (even though it were by a large majority vote), would necessarily alienate and drive out those who could not accept it. They might be as good members, as earnest to live pure and good lives, as any, and yet, because they could not agree to what the society had decided to stand for, they would be virtually excluded.

We are thus led to see that there is a great difference between the case of an individual and that of a society. Because an individual should endeavor to have a philosophical system of his own, it by no means follows that an ethical society should follow his example; just because an ethical society is a combination of individuals, each of whom should have his individual freedom and preserve his intellectual integrity, it should respect these individuals—every one of them—in their rights and refrain from imposing what each one in his freedom and on his own honor would not accept. It might well be that an individual should hesitate to commit himself to a definite philosophical opinion from lack of courage; but an ethical society might refuse to commit itself from very conscience. In fact, it must have occurred to every one who has followed my train of thought, that for an ethical society to commit itself to a philosophical system is the same essentially as it would be to commit itself to a theological creed. A philosophical system, it is true, might not contain damnatory clauses; it might say nothing about the separation of believers from non-believers in another world; yet it might none the less contribute to such a separation in this world, which to some would appear almost as bad. Philosophical associations, as such, are certainly desirable; but philosophical associations assuming to be churches or ethical societies would, I fear, prove in this respect as baneful to progress (intellectual progress included) as churches with theological creeds behind them have proved in the past. A church or ethical society that appeals to the conscience and stands as something sacred in the world, should sedulously avoid confusing the conscience and making men treat as sacred what is not really so. The Christian Church has so confused the conscience time and again, and theological morals have fallen thereby into just reproach. Let the new era not be betrayed by specious arguments into the pitfalls of the old; let it not fail to say now and always that intellectual error is not sin; let it make only those things obligatory which the common conscience of men makes obligatory, and which would be just as truly so though no church or ethical societies were in existence.

Why should not adherents of philosophical systems be content with having a perfectly free field in which to propagate their views? Why should they wish to bind over a society (as such) to them and so give them the sanction which that would imply? For my own part, I say, let He-



gelianism or Spencerianism or Monism make a disciple of every member of an ethical society, so it win the free assent of his or her intelligence—but not by being made authoritative or anywise compulsory. In fact, is it not plain that a society that should put forth a philosophical creed would cease to be an ethical society?—since it would no longer be a company of good men (that is, those who strive to be such), but a company of *such* good men as subscribed to a certain creed. The moral aim would cease to be the distinctive thing—the alone essential thing; instead of a true church or ethical brotherhood, we should have simply a new sect. I am not averse to separations, to drawing the lines, to standing definitely for one thing and not for another; I only ask that the separations be made on the right basis, that in ethical associations the lines be drawn on right or wrong conduct (or aims), not on assent to debatable philosophical propositions; I say that the Ethical movement does stand definitely for one thing—namely, the elevation of the moral life of man, covering both conceptions and practice. It wishes to make the pursuit of moral perfection (in both private and social life) the basis of a new religious order, of a new, all-comprehensive and sacred fellowship, and just in so far it stands in irreconcilable antagonism to all ostensibly sacred associations—*i. e.*, to all associations claiming to bind the conscience of man—whether they be called churches, congregations or societies—which make speculative opinions, whether theological or philosophical, a condition of membership. In answer, then, to the question, What is the attitude of an ethical society to philosophical systems? I say hospitality, a fair and unhindered field to all, but committal to none.

The whole question might, however, shape itself differently if it were true that ethics rests on a basis of philosophy. A house must of necessity stand on a foundation; to propose to have a house without first laying a foundation would be absurd indeed. A tree draws its nourishment from the soil and air; to say, "Let us have a tree, but no matter about the soil and air," would be called by every one a crazy idea. Now, it is easy to say (and may appear convincing) that ethics without philosophy is like a house without a foundation to stand on, or a tree without air and soil; many think that such a comparison is an argument. But a little reflection tells us that all depends upon whether the comparison is a legitimate one—whether ethics is really like a house or a tree. No one can question that an individual's ethical life is of this nature. It grows; it is throughout dependent on certain conditions; it must have a basis of conviction to stand on; it must have air to invigorate it and soil from which to get vital strength. The same is true of what is called the Ethical movement. I have myself spoken of "The Basis of the Ethical Movement,"\* and sought to indicate those fundamental convictions on which it must rest. But an individual's ethical life or a movement to promote the ethical life of individuals is not ethics. An ethical life is a life in accordance with ethical principle; and

\* This was my *opening* lecture before the Chicago Ethical Society in 1883.

ethics proper deals with ethical principle directly. Even here it is necessary to distinguish ; for as an idea or set of ideas, as a part of the furniture of the mind, ethics has grown and been produced. No one can deny that ideas of right and wrong began to be; that as a system of knowledge ethics has had a history, a slow development, and is yet far from being a completed house. But ethics has an objective side, it is a knowledge of something, and this something is a principle or standard or norm of action. All ethical knowledge is the knowledge of the true laws of human action ; and the term "ethics" is often used as covering those laws. These laws are expressed by such terms as *should* or *ought*; the fundamental formula of them as reached by the general ethical consciousness of civilized men to-day is justice. Hence the real, the ultimate question is as to the nature of ethical principle itself: is it something like a house which does not exist till it is created ; is it a product, a growth ? This question must be most carefully distinguished from the question of the nature of ethics taken subjectively as a science, or as incorporated into a life or made the aim of a movement. Inexact and slipshod thinkers do not make the distinction; but all clear thinking requires it. Let me use an illustration which will, I think, make my meaning clear. Physics deals in part with the laws of motion of material bodies. I do not know enough to say whether it is a completed science ; but it certainly has had a history and some time it must have had a beginning or beginnings. Physics in this sense may very well be compared to a house or a tree. But suppose that some one should thereby infer that the laws of motion themselves are a product or creation, that they have had a history and began to be. The statement may possibly be true, but it certainly is a distinct statement and can nowise be inferred from the one first made. It is possible that physics as a science should be like the frailest and most dependent of earthly products and yet that the physical laws should have had no history, no beginning and no ending, being literally from everlasting to everlasting. So many actually think, so, I suppose, all materialists think—though there are those, of course, who believe that the laws of motion were created and might have been different.

And now, when we thus clearly set our question before ourselves and ask, Is ethical principle itself—the law of justice, for example—a something that began to be, a creation?—what is our answer ? It certainly cannot be proved to be a creation, any more than the laws of motion can be proved to be—for no one claims to have been present when it was produced or has any word from one who was ; on the other hand, it has the look of something not created, and it is difficult—nay, it is impossible to me—to conceive of human beings ever existing over whom the law of justice did not hold sway. They may, of course, not have been aware of it, as they may have been equally ignorant of certain physical laws which none the less existed—and when they did become aware of it, they may have acted more or less against it, only gradually learning to discipline their wills in obedience to it ; none the less was it the ideal, the law for human beings always. Yes, it is impossible to

conceive of reasonable beings on any other planet or in the remotest corners of space for whom it would not be the ideal law. It is not merely a human law, but one for universal intelligence ; it inheres in the very nature of the case when two or more reasonable beings confront one another, just as it is sometimes conceived that the laws of motion are a part of the very nature of material bodies. I know it is sometimes held that justice is created by God ; but, as I pointed out last Sunday, some of the profoundest of theologians have repudiated such a view—and it is really taught in no Christian creed that I know of, and the opposite view is implied in certain passages in the Scriptures themselves. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”—how unmeaning would that ancient saying—it belongs in Genesis itself—be if God were conceived as making right according to his own will ! Is not the very elevation and grandeur of it in the implication that there are moral limits to even Almighty Power—that there are eternal standards to which the Eternal God himself appeals?—the confidence that he abides by them, that he has no faintest impulse or wish to depart from absolute equity, making the very substance and joy of the best, the only noble, theological faith.

I think, then, that it may be held with complete assurance—and the ordinary objections do not in the slightest militate against it—that the law of right or equity is an uncreated law, applying in the very nature of things to reasonable beings whenever and wherever they come to be—yes, applying to God himself (if the theistic position is true) in his dealings with his rational creation. It is not a product, but as immutable as gravity. Yes, I can conceive of the law of gravity changing, but I cannot conceive of the law of right changing, growing, decreasing, failing or ceasing to be. It is in this sense that I hold that ethics is something ultimate and does not rest on anything else. I do not say this of ethics in the subjective sense, as a system of knowledge ; I do not say it of conscience or the moral sense or the moral life, much less of any ethical movement ; I say it of ethical principle ; of that of which ethical knowledge takes cognizance ; of that on which conscience is founded (just as physics is founded on objective physical law) ; of that the harmony of an individual's will and aspiration with which makes the moral life, and on which any genuine and lasting moral movement must itself be based. And it is because these distinctions are not kept in mind that I believe almost all the confusion and confused debate on the subject arises ; unless, indeed, one holds that there is no objective law ; that there is no right outside the human mind ; that that is right which any one thinks to be right—*i. e.*, that right and wrong, justice and injustice, are purely matters of custom and convention. Such moral skepticism is, of course, possible and is, perhaps, more or less current in the community ; but it, too, I believe, rests on a confusion of ideas that will dissipate with accurate and close thinking.

Using philosophy, then, in the sense in which it is distinguished from ethics, I cannot discover that ethics is dependent on philosophy—nor do I think I really understand what the assertion, taken strictly, means. Does physics, does mathemat-

ics, does logic, depend upon philosophy? Does not every one, whatever his philosophy, have to recognize that bodies attract one another directly according to their mass and inversely as the square of their distance from each other; that two and two make four; that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, and that there are certain rules which must be observed in all correct thinking? Do not these separate sciences give to philosophy the very data upon which it works? And does not philosophy—unless it is an arbitrary thing and mere *a priori* product of the brain—simply gather together the results of the different sciences, make an harmonious system of them and present them in the form of some unitary and comprehensive conception? If so, then ethics is a part of philosophy, just as physics is or mathematics is; and in one sense philosophy is dependent upon it—since if there is an objective moral law, any philosophy is false which fails to take account of it. In fact, genuine philosophical differences (if this is a correct understanding of philosophy) relate simply to the way in which the different sciences are harmonized and unified; the data remain the same (or would, if the sciences were perfected), but the manner of uniting them is different. The theist unites them (or attempts to) in one way; the materialist in another; the pantheist in another; the monist in perhaps still another, and so on. But the theist who builds up his theism in a scientific spirit does not deduce (strictly speaking) his physics, his mathematics, his logic or his ethics, from his conception of the Supreme Mind, but his conception of a Supreme Mind is the way in which he interprets these various sciences and makes them seem one harmonious whole to his mind. If this is a true way of conceiving of the matter, a philosophy can never *give* an ethics unless it has already taken one up into itself; just as it can never give a physics or a logic unless it has already assumed and acted upon these data. In other words, as the deeper thinkers have said with regard to the doctrine of evolution, that nothing, after all, can be evolved which was not first involved, so nothing can be really deduced from philosophy which was not first induced from more concrete sources. For my own part, as I have stated on another occasion, ethics, so far from being dependent on something beside itself, helps me to make my philosophy and enlarges philosophy beyond the limits which are sometimes set to it. Without ethics, my view of the world as a whole would be radically different from what it is when ethics contributes, as it does, to its formation. With ethics, I know to my own satisfaction (though I would not prescribe that knowledge to others) that certain views of the world are false.

No, ethics is as little dependent on philosophy as on theology. In fact, theology, in any profound and scientific sense, is but a species of philosophy. To Aristotle, philosophy and theology were almost identical—since he conceived of a Supreme Reason or Mind as the ultimate, unifying principle of all the phenomena of the world. It is erroneous to think that the Ethical movement is anti-theological and that it stands in antagonism to the old religion because this has made the will of God the basis of ethics. Such a statement in regard to the



old religion is really unjust; thoughtless Christians may have taken such a childlike view, but Christian theologians have rarely held it—the law of right, so far from making dependent on the Divine will, they have often conceived of as a part of God's very nature. The Ethical movement is not founded to give a new basis of ethics. I said long ago: "Jesus himself rests on a deeper foundation in the reason and conscience of man; and on that bottom rock we may stand to-day as truly as he stood." There is no new basis, there is only the old basis—the basis of the uncreated law of right, which it is our business to diligently study and faithfully apply in the changed intellectual and social conditions of the modern world—a law which it is as futile to say we know exhaustively as that we know exhaustively the heavens above our heads; a law which encompasses us and makes our sun by day and our stars by night; a law to live in the light of which is life and to forget which is death; a law which is stern to behold and sweet to obey; a law which is no alien thing, but our own proper path; a law which is one with liberty and happiness and joy. The real object of the Ethical movement, as I understand it, is not to give a new philosophy of ethics, but to give ethics itself a new place in the consciousness of men, to make it seem great enough to serve in itself as a basis of religious union; its aim is to unite men in efforts to make ethics powerful in the world, so that the moral standpoint shall be the supreme one from which to view every department of human life. Every one knows to what an extent politics, business, and even what is known as religion itself, are dissevered from ethics—how all relegate moral considerations to a secondary place; so that what is at bottom nothing but egoism passes almost everywhere as respectable, and high views of man's duty and of his possibilities are treated as unreal and utopian. This slight force in human affairs that we call conscience we wish to make a master-force, and we wish it to be so educated and developed that it will more and more mirror in human consciousness the absolute and uncreated laws.

O friends, O comrades in the warfare of human life, O my brothers in this Society, we cannot hope to agree in all things, we must be tolerant of one another. I may have said things this very morning and a week ago that have their coloring from my own personal philosophical view, which some of you cannot accept; but there is one thing in which we can agree—namely, in holding that right and justice ought to be done in this world; that when we find out what is really right and just there is nothing under heaven but to do it or strive for it; and further, that we should find it out—that this is our main object and business in life—find it out in every department of life, both to keep our own hands free from stain and to take no unworthy part in the onward movement of human affairs. A center of moral light and of increasing moral light, and a center of moral influence, of moral warmth and inspiration—that is my central ideal of an ethical society.











